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ABSTRACT

A study collected the life histories of 100 subjects to identify factors that lead to professional success for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Subjects were 100 black and white men and women in the upper middle class of the professional class in business, academia, or government. All were midcareer, aged 40-55. Sixty came from disadvantaged backgrounds; the others formed a control group of people with at least one parent who graduated from high school or held higher status jobs. Findings indicated educational attainment was crucial. In addition, a positive relationship with a teacher was an important factor. Religion in the home was able to offset difficulties, and some achievers applied the positive aspects of religion to their professional development. Mentoring was shown to be an important factor in success; however, this was heavily influenced by both gender and race. One crucial personality trait was a willingness to work hard. Also important was the ability to confront problems directly and to turn them into positive experiences. Finally, a belief in one's ability to succeed was a vital prerequisite. (YLB)

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The Disadvantaged: Paths To Success

That some people become successful professionally despite severe disadvantages in their early lives has long been evident, but reasons for their achievements have remained obscure. Now, however, two reports on the familial, social, and academic experiences and personality traits of such people have identified some factors that may make the difference (Harrington & Boardman, 1989a, 1989b). While these factors vary with the individuals, and interact with race and gender differences, they suggest ways that similarly disadvantaged youths may be helped to achieve.

A brief discussion of Harrington and Boardman's study, upon which their two reports were based, follows.

METHOD

The subjects of the study were 100 black and white men and women with high occupational status (upper middle class of professional class) in business, academia, or government. All were mid-career, aged 40 to 55.

Sixty subjects came from disadvantaged backgrounds; of these, 15 were white men, 15 black men, 15 white women, and 15 black women. Their parents were not high school graduates and they held low status jobs while the subjects were growing up. The remaining 40 subjects--the control group--consisted of 10 white men, 10 black men, 10 white women, and 10 black women. These people had at least one parent who graduated from high school and/or held higher status jobs.

Questions elicited extensive biographical information, accounts of significant incidents in the subjects' lives, and descriptions of influential people. They also covered the subjects' personality characteristics, especially their personal resources (motivational and personality orientation) and personal strategies for coping with and defending against stress and adversity.

Responses were taped for later analysis by social and clinical psychologists or psychological anthropologists who could listen for feeling and tone in the subjects' voices as well as interpret the content of the answers.

FINDINGS

Family Background. Among the formerly disadvantaged subjects, nearly 50 percent overall grew up with only one parent present. Fewer than half the women, and only a third of the black women, had two parents. In contrast, 70 percent of the control group were raised by two parents. The control group also had fewer siblings than did the formerly disadvantaged.

The formerly disadvantaged white males tended to come from less loving, though less strict, homes, while all black subjects tended to come from more loving and less tense homes.

In general, the mothers of black subjects were more frequently employed than the mothers of whites, and they were better educated.

Family Support. White women in the control group received the least support for schooling, in terms of high expectations, encouragement, and active helping. Black men received the most. In general, the formerly disadvantaged subjects were less likely than the control group to express pleasure when talking about their family, and sometimes even expressed hatred, although they did not leave home any earlier.

Religion. Religion played a larger role in the lives of the formerly disadvantaged than in the lives of the control group, but black families in general were more religious, with the families of black women the most religious. In fact, black women overall were more likely than others to incorporate religion into their current successful lives.

Educational Attainment. Both formerly disadvantaged and control subjects reached the same educational level, despite differences in the educational attainment and socioeconomic status of their parents. However, the formerly disadvantaged attended private elementary and secondary schools and colleges less often than control subjects. Overall, though, blacks had more formal education then whites, and black men had the most.

Employment History. Men in the control group, predictably, received more family help in obtaining jobs, although some of the formerly disadvantaged women did receive such help. Interestingly, the formerly disadvantaged were more likely to have been offered jobs post-college that they hadn't applied for. They also were more likely to create their own jobs. Pre-college, they were more apt to be fired, and to give some of their earnings to their family.

Mentors. Differences here were based more on race and gender than on family background. Whites reported white mentors 90-100% of the time, while blacks reported white mentors only 10 to 28% of the time. Both men and women had male mentors more often than female mentors, but women were more likely than men to have ever had a female mentor.

While not serving as mentors per se, teachers positively influenced the formerly disadvantaged, particularly the black women among them, who had the fewest resources of all. Of special note is the fact that subjects recalled favorable experiences with teachers without having been specifically asked about relationships with them.

Current Family Situation. Of the 100 subjects, 70 were married at the time of their interview, 11 had never married, and the remaining 19 were divorced or widowed. The greatest differences among the subjects in this area were between men and women, not between the formerly disadvantaged and the control group. For example, almost three-quarters of those never married were women. Further, white men in the control group were more likely to be married longer and to be in relationships where the partners assumed traditional roles. Women, particularly among the formerly disadvantaged, frequently cited the interpersonal costs of success.

Future Plans. The formerly disadvantaged group more frequently reported plans for the

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future, usually involving new careers or education.

Psychological Characteristics. As might be expected, the formerly disadvantaged faced more obstacles than did the control group, and they were more apt to confront obstacles directly than to deal with them indirectly. They were also more likely to turn failure around so it would have a positive outcome. "This suggests that [their] earlier adjustments, transitions, and frustrations might just have paid off--as adults they were better trained for failure..." assert Harrington and Boardman. Perhaps the underlying personality trait for these behaviors is an internal locus of control (feeling in control of one's life as opposed to feeling a victim of external, uncontrollable forces); the formerly disadvantaged demonstrated much less externality than did the control group, and in general blacks showed less externality than whites. This latter finding is an interesting reversal from previous literature, but it suggests that for controls and for whites the external environment may have been seen as less constraining.

The strong internal locus of control demonstrated by the formerly disadvantaged coupled with the lack of rewards in their youth reinforced their self-sufficiency. In general, men were more oriented toward reward than women, and women were more cost-oriented. Like the formerly disadvantaged group, women probably had less early exposure to salient rewards than did men, thus explaining their greater cost orientation.

An overwhelming majority of all 100 subjects were rated strong or moderate on their motivation to achieve. Three-quarters were highly reward-oriented, despite the differences among constituencies within the total subject group.

SUMMARY

The life histories of the 100 subjects included in Harrington and Boardman's study demonstrate that there are many different paths to professional success. If a pattern can be identified, however, it is that people from disadvantaged backgrounds and, to a slightly lesser extent, those disadvantaged because they are women and/or racial minorities, have similar personality traits and experiences. People from a higher socioeconomic background, and white men, tend to be more diverse in the steps they take toward achievement.

In general, the following can be said about people who overcame early disadvantage:

Education. Educational attainment is crucial, particularly for blacks and women, demonstrating that good schooling is necessary for later professional success. In addition, a positive relationship with a teacher is also an important factor.

Religion. Religion in the home can help offset difficulties, and some achievers (notably, black women) applied the positive aspects of religion to their professional development.

Mentors. Mentoring was shown to be an important factor in success; however, this was heavily influenced by both gender and race, such that whites mentioned white mentors, blacks mentioned blacks, males mentioned males, and females mentioned females.

Personality Traits. One crucial trait is a willingness to work hard. Also important is the ability to confront problems directly and to turn them into positive experiences. Finally, a belief in one's ability to succeed is a vital prerequisite.

by Amy Wells and Wendy Schwartz

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